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The distinguishing Characters of true Christianity; and the great Causes of all Corruptions of it.

A

SERMON,

Preached in the High Church of *Edinburgh*, before His Majesty's High Commissioner to the GENERAL ASSEMBLY of the Church of *SCOTLAND*, at the Opening of the Assembly the 11th Day of *May* 1749.

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By *GEORGE WISHART*, M. A.
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To

The Right Honourable

ALEXANDER Earl of *Leven*,

His MAJESTY's

HIGH COMMISSIONER

To the

GENERAL ASSEMBLY of the Church of SCOTLAND,

This Sermon is moſt reſpectfully dedicated by

His Grace's

moſt obliged,

moſt obedient,

and moſt humble Servant,

GEORGE WISHART.

BRITISH MUSEUM

A

SERMON.

1 TIM. vi. 3.

——*The words of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt, and the doctrine which is according to godlineſs.*

GOD hath at ſundry times and in divers manners diſcovered himſelf and his will to mankind; and they have as often corrupted religion. By the light of nature, he hath afforded certain diſcoveries of religion to all. But while *the inviſible things of God* were *clearly* to be *ſeen from the creation of the world*, and might have been *underſtood by the things which are made, even his eternal power and Godhead*; mankind, *not liking to retain God in their knowledge, became vain in their imaginations, and their fooliſh hearts were darkened: they changed the truth of God into a lie* [a]. In place of the true religion of nature, they ſubſtituted the groſſeſt error, ſuperſtition,

[a] *Rom.* i. 20. 21. 22. 23. 25. 28.

and idolatry, fitted to ſooth and encourage thoſe corruptions of heart from which they ſprung.

Amidſt this prevailing darkneſs which overſpread the world, God was pleaſed to favour one choſen race with the light of revelation; intending that, by their means, the benefit ſhould in due time be further extended. Yet they too corrupted themſelves. Not keeping cloſe to the divine diſcoveries made by *Moſes* and the prophets, they fell into a *vain* religion and *worſhip*, receiving *for doctrines the commandments of men*, and their pretended *traditions, by which the word of God was made void* [a].

As the neceſſities of mankind required a further and more extenſive revelation, this God hath been graciouſly pleaſed to grant by his Son Jeſus Chriſt. But neither hath this moſt perfect inſtitution of religion, ſo clearly delivered to the world by the Son of God himſelf, proved ſecure even againſt the groſſeſt corruptions. So early as in the days of the Apoſtles themſelves, it appears from my text, and other places, that men, departing from true Chriſtianity, fell a *doting about queſtions, and ſtrifes of words:* there were introduced into religion, *fables and commandments of men; which turned from the truth* [b]: and, as they took their riſe from the luſts of a bad

[a] *Matth.* xv. 6. 9. & *Mark* vii. 7. 13.
[b] *Tit.* i. 14.

heart,

heart, *increaſed unto more ungodlineſs* [a]. And in latter ages how remarkably have thoſe Apoſtolical predictions been fulfilled, that *ſome ſhould depart from the faith, giving heed to ſeducing ſpirits, and doctrines of demons* [b]; that as *there were falſe prophets among the Jews, ſo there ſhould be falſe teachers among Chriſtians, and many ſhould follow their pernicious ways* [c]?

As it appears, then, that mankind have in all ages been extremely apt to fall into corruptions of religion; and as Chriſtianity in particular, the laſt and concluding revelation from God, hath ſuffered, through the perverſeneſs of men, the groſſeſt corruptions; it is therefore a moſt uſeful and neceſſary inquiry, What are the proper characters by which true Chriſtianity is to be diſtinguiſhed from all corruptions of it? And this will make way for another diſcovery of like importance; What are the chief ſteps by which corruptions have been introduced, and the cauſes by which they have been promoted; that, guarding againſt theſe, we may carefully maintain the purity of religion?

Both theſe the Apoſtle leads us to a view of in my text, when he deſcribes Chriſtianity by theſe expreſſions, *the words of our Lord*

[a] 2 *Tim.* ii. 16. [b] 1 *Tim.* iv. 1. [c] 2 *Pet.* ii. 1. 2.

Jeſus Chriſt, and the doctrine which is according to godlineſs; at the ſame time intending to repreſent mens not keeping cloſe to this view of Chriſtianity, as the immediate introduction to all corruptions of it. Not maintaining a fixed regard to Jeſus Chriſt as their only lord and maſter in religion, and a due attention to his words;—not conſidering Chriſtianity as a doctrine according to godlineſs; they fall a *doting about queſtions and ſtrifes of words; whereof cometh envy, ſtrife, railings, evil ſurmiſings, perverſe diſputings of men of corrupt minds, and deſtitute of the truth, who ſuppoſe that gain is godlineſs*; that the beſt religion is that which brings the greateſt worldly gains.

Theſe two things then ſhall be the ſubjects of my preſent diſcourſe; the diſtinguiſhing characters of true Chriſtianity; and the chief ſteps by which corruptions have been introduced: from which will ariſe to our view the cauſes which have promoted theſe and all ſucceeding ſteps of corruption. I need not ſay how much this concerns all of us, and more eſpecially thoſe who have the honour to be the miniſters of Chriſt, and are particularly intruſted with the care of his religion; and how proper it is to employ our thoughts on the preſent occaſion.

I. *What*

I. *What is truth*[a]*?* ſaid *Pilate* to our Saviour: A queſtion of great importance in the conduct of life, as truth is the guide to happineſs; of ſpecial importance in matters of religion, which reſpect not only the intereſts of a preſent life, but the concerns of eternity. What is true Chriſtianity? how is it to be diſtinguiſhed from all falſe pretences of it? This was the firſt thing propoſed to be conſidered: To which the Apoſtle points out a twofold ſolution.

1. Chriſtianity is to be found in *the words of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt; i. e.* the inſtructions delivered, either immediately by himſelf, or by his Apoſtles, to whom he gave commiſſion, and *ſent his Spirit to guide them into all truth*[b]. The fundamental principle of true Chriſtianity is, a regard to Jeſus Chriſt as our only lord and maſter in religion, the alone mediator between God and man, by whom we are to come to the Father. *Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jeſus Chriſt*[c]. He it is who hath redeemed us by his blood, and thus hath purchaſed a right to us as his ſervants. He it is whom God the Father *hath exalted to be a prince and a ſaviour*[d], to preſcribe to men the terms of their acceptance with God and eternal ſalvation, and to beſtow pardon of

[a] *John* xviii. 38.
[b] *John* xiv. 26. & xvi. 13.
[c] 1 *Cor.* iii. 11.
[d] *Acts* v. 31.

ſin

ſin and eternal life on thoſe who comply with theſe terms. The Apoſtles conſtantly direct the regard of Chriſtians to him as their only lord. They, though endued with an infallible ſpirit, claim no other regard, than as *ſervants to the church of Chriſt for his ſake* [a], and *delivering to* men *what they received from him* [b], by his Spirit communicated to them; of which they gave abundant proof, by thoſe ſpiritual Gifts, and miraculous Powers, which they exerciſed. *Who is Paul, and who is Apollos*, ſays the Apoſtle, *but miniſters by whom ye believed? Was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul* [c]? It is to Jeſus Chriſt alone that we are to be abſolutely ſubject in matters of religion; none elſe have a right to preſcribe to us what we are to believe and do in order to ſalvation.

This being the fundamental principle of Chriſtianity, the particulars of it are to be learned from *the words of Chriſt*. Human inſtruction is of uſe to Chriſtians, ſo far as it engages them in attending to his words; and aſſiſts them in diſcovering the true meaning of them, by the ſame kind of methods by which we can lead one to underſtand the meaning of any perſon, whoſe mind is committed to writing, and remains upon record.

[a] 2 *Cor.* iv. 5. [b] 1 *Cor.* xi. 23. [c] 1 *Cor.* iii. 5. & i. 13.

The

The ſtanding records of his inſtructions and precepts we are ſtill to have recourſe to: by them are all controverſies in religion to be determined, and not by mere human deciſions of the greateſt authority. In this examination, therefore, every man is to judge for himſelf, as he ſhall be anſwerable to his great lord: for, to make the words of Chriſt the ſtandard of truth in religion, and at the ſame time oblige people to underſtand them in the ſenſe which others think fit to put upon them, is to give with one hand, and take away with the other; it is in reality to put the dictates of men *in the place* of *His* words.

To attend to his words, and judge for ourſelves of the true meaning of them, is a ſure and ſafe way of determining what true Chriſtianity is. All thoſe things which Chriſt hath made neceſſary to be believed and done by us, he hath plainly told us that they are ſo; and they are ſet before us in a variety of lights, ſo as to be obvious to the loweſt capacities of men, upon their giving ſerious application. So that the difficulty of underſtanding Chriſtianity aright, does not ariſe from any intricacy in the thing itſelf, but from the prejudices and vitious paſſions of men, darkening their minds. An honeſt heart, which the vulgar are as capable of as the learned; and that ordinary divine aſſiſtance which all have equal acceſs to in the due

uſe

uſe of the means of religious inquiry; theſe are the great things neceſſary for leading us to juſt notions of the Chriſtian faith.

By this method then we are led to a ſatiſfying diſcovery of true Chriſtianity. That is the juſteſt ſcheme of Chriſtian religion which is moſt clearly and obviouſly to be ſeen in the words of Chriſt: thoſe things are of the greateſt importance on which He lays the greateſt ſtreſs: thoſe are the inſtitutions of Chriſtianity, and thoſe the rules of Chriſtian worſhip, which He hath appointed: that, and no other, is the proper ſolemnity of Chriſtian ordinances, which He hath given them. Here, and here only, is a ſure bottom for our faith to reſt upon, that it may *ſtand, not in the wiſdom of men, but in the power of God* [a]. *Lord, to whom ſhall we go,* but unto thee? *Thou haſt the words of eternal life; and we believe, and are ſure, that thou art that Chriſt, the Son of the living God* [b]. Following thy divine light, we are ſafe and happy; *following* thee, we *ſhall not walk in darkneſs, but ſhall have the light of life* [c].

To aſſiſt us further in diſtinguiſhing true Chriſtianity amidſt all falſe pretences, it is in the nature and deſign of it ſuitable to the

[a] 1 *Cor.* ii. 5. [b] *John* vi. 68. 69. [c] *John* viii. 12.

Character

Character of the holy Jesus our great Master. It is,

2. *The doctrine according to godliness.* The great design of it is, to purify mens hearts, and reform their lives. This is the tendency of all the particular Doctrines of the Christian religion; of the discoveries it gives us of God, of his love and mercy in Jesus Christ; of the humiliation, sufferings and death of the Son of God; of his resurrection, and exaltation to the highest glory; of the awful views presented to us of a future judgment, and of the happiness and misery of another life. These are all calculated for recommending real goodness in the strongest manner, by all the arguments of love and gratitude, hope and fear; for deterring men from sin, and killing the seeds of vice in the heart; for exciting their endeavours in the study and practice of universal holiness, and promoting in them the most effectual inward principles of it. In this light does Christianity expressly present itself to us. The blessing of the gospel bestowed upon the *Gentile* world is expressed as resulting in this; *purifying their hearts by faith* [a]. The sum of the Christian religion is, *faith working by love* [b]; promoting in the soul the love of God and the love of mankind, and thereby becoming

[a] *Acts* xv. 9. [b] *Gal.* v. 6.

an active principle, exerting itself in all the duties of obedience, and an useful life. *The end of the commandment is charity*, or *love* [a]. This shows us all the parts of the Christian doctrine in their proper light; as not mere speculations, but practical truths. It represents them in their different degrees of importance, according as they have a nearer or more remote connexion with the great design they point at.

The same character is to be applied to the Institutions of Christianity, in order to separate them from all corrupt mixtures. They are all designed *for the perfecting of the saints*, and *the edifying of the body of Christ in love* [b]; and have a proper tendency to promote this design. They serve to present to our minds the important discoveries of Christianity; to fix an habitual impression of them, and thereby promote their practical influence: they engage us in the contemplation of divine and heavenly things; and thus are means of promoting a divine and heavenly temper and life. The Worship which Christ hath instituted, is a spiritual worship, and a reasonable service: It consists in the exercise of pious and devout affections, animated with just views of God, and a lively sense of the things of God; together with such outward

[a] 1 *Tim.* i. 5. [b] *Eph.* iv. 12. 16.

expressions

expreſſions of adoration as a devout heart naturally falls in with. And as it is a proper exerciſe of our love and adoration of the Deity, it ſerves to eſtabliſh in our ſouls an habitual regard to him, as an effectual principle of an uniform goodneſs. The two external rites, which diſtinguiſh the Chriſtian religion, Baptiſm, and the Lord's Supper, are moſt wiſely adapted to the purpoſe of repreſenting to the mind things of a ſpiritual nature, and promoting a lively impreſſion of them: By their ſimplicity, they are fitted for *inſtruction*, and not for *amuſement*; and the meaning and ſpiritual improvement of them is obvious. By theſe characters is the native purity of Chriſtian Ordinances to be diſcerned; as means of raiſing the ſoul to God, and transforming it into the image of that Being whom we adore.

Thus true Chriſtianity, to diſtinguiſh it from all falſe pretences, ſpeaks to the hearts and conſciences of men: to them does it manifeſt itſelf, in all its doctrines and inſtitutions, by thoſe characters of purity and goodneſs which ſhow it to be worthy of God. At once does it manifeſt and recommend itſelf. It recommends itſelf, not by favouring mens luſts and vitious paſſions; but by touching the heart, addreſſing their natural ſenſe of goodneſs, and thereby engaging their reaſonable approbation and choice.

Being thus directed to a ſatisfying way of diſcovering true Chriſtianity, by the principle it is founded on, and the method of inſtruction concerning it which this points out to us; and by the great end it propoſes, and the view this gives us of all the parts of it; we are led to obſerve,

II. WHAT are the grand Marks of departure from true Chriſtianity, and the chief ſteps by which particular Corruptions of it have been firſt introduced? from which will ariſe to our view the Cauſes which have promoted theſe, and all ſucceeding ſteps of corruption. The grand Characters of Defection are, being followers of men, and not of Jeſus Chriſt; and turning away from the great deſign of religion, which is to promote ſubſtantial goodneſs, and perverting it to other purpoſes. Into theſe are all particular corruptions to be reſolved.

1. ONE grand ſtep by which Chriſtians turn aſide from the way of truth, is, by departing from a regard to Jeſus Chriſt as their only Maſter in Religion, and from an immediate attention to *his words*. This makes way for receiving *the Doctrines and Commandments of men*, in place of *the genuine Doctrines and Inſtitutions of Chriſt*. Inſtead of a religion which repreſents its Glorious Founder in his proper

proper Character, as the Saviour of mankind, a religion calculated for making men good and happy; people come to have impoſed upon them artful forms and ſchemes of religion, contrived to ſerve the worldly deſigns and intereſts of thoſe who have the direction of religious matters. By this means is deſtroyed that proper Unity of the Church which is its great beauty and ſtrength, their being one in Chriſt; united in the acknowledgment of him as their only Head, united together as Members of his body by the bonds of love and peace. Chriſtians falling off from a cloſe adherence to Jeſus Chriſt, ſeparate from one another, under particular Men as their Leaders: inſtead of attending to thoſe things which Chriſt himſelf hath determined to be of greateſt importance; they come to lay ſtreſs, each Sect, on their own diſtinguiſhing tenets and forms, and to value themſelves upon theſe. Thus the Party-Spirit ariſes; Chriſtians of different denominations are alienated from one another in their affections; hatred and animoſity prevail; in oppoſition to that Spirit of love, meekneſs and peace, which animated our bleſſed Maſter, and is from him communicated to all who adhere to him by a true and lively faith. Such is the conſequence of giving up with a fixed regard to the ſole Authority of Jeſus Chriſt in religious matters.

How

How men are induced to make this ſtep of defection, is the next thing to be obſerved. There is the weakneſs of ſome, and the art and ambition of others practiſing upon it.

The bulk of mankind are very apt to reſign their faith and conſciences in religious matters to the management of Others. They do not accuſtom themſelves to think on theſe things as they ought: the things of ſenſe and of the world do ſo much ingroſs their thoughts, that they are backward to apply their minds to things of a ſpiritual nature; and therefore they are much diſpoſed to take their religion as formed to their hand by others. This general thoughtleſſneſs prepares them for readily conceiving a ſuperſtitious awe in religious matters, which further checks the free exerciſe of their reaſonable faculties: they are apt to be impreſſed with the notion of an Authority, too ſacred to be contradicted, in thoſe who have the character of their Spiritual Guides; and ſo to be overawed into an abſolute ſubmiſſion. Together with this, it is to be obſerved, that when men have not been accuſtomed to think, and in this way to eſtabliſh themſelves in rational and diſtinct notions of religion; they are apt to be carried away with the enticing words of man's wiſdom [a], addreſſed to their paſſions: theſe be-

[a] 1 Cor. ii. 4.

ing

ing artfully raiſed, run away with their judgments: ſo that whoever has the addreſs to work upon their paſſions, catches them at once, and makes an eaſy prey of them. After all, there are ſome things in which people are found to ſhow themſelves abundantly tenacious: there are favourite humours in religion, as well as in the affairs of the world, which inſiſt to be gratified: and thoſe who ſet up to be Rulers of mens faith, muſt, at leaſt if they have not worldly power on their ſide, be in ſome reſpects Slaves in their turn; they muſt ſubject themſelves in a good meaſure to the prevailing whims and caprices of mankind. But gratifying theſe, very readily ſecures the leading of them in all other reſpects. So that, if one has not the ſettled purpoſe of making people truly wiſer and better, which is the only valuable purpoſe, the *management* of them is what Art can but too eaſily accompliſh.

While the weakneſs of the bulk of mankind hath ſo far expoſed them, Ambition, and other corrupt principles entering into the minds of the profeſſed Teachers of religion, have diſpoſed them to improve this advantage given them, for raiſing and eſtabliſhing to themſelves a Spiritual Dominion. Pride, or the intereſts of this world, have made them loſe the ſenſe of their true Glory as the Servants of Chriſt: ſo that, inſtead of endeavouring

vouring with an honeſt ſelf-denied zeal to promote the honour of Chriſt, and the intereſts of his kingdom in the hearts of men; they have made it their buſineſs to engage people in an abſolute ſubjection to their own Authority; to promote in them a blind veneration of themſelves, and thereby make them ſubſervient to their own purpoſes. Thus have the minds of the weaker ſort been enſlaved. And as their Spiritual Rulers have gradually increaſed in power, thoſe of better underſtandings, ſtill perceiving *the truth as it is in Jeſus*, have through Cowardice given up with the open profeſſion of it; and have not had the reſolution to appear as ſtedfaſt followers of Chriſt alone: like many in our Saviour's own time, who *believed on him, but becauſe of the Phariſees they did not confeſs him, leſt they ſhould be put out of the ſynagogue* [a]. Let us now,

2. TAKE a view of the Corruption of Religion, as introduced by another ſtep in conjunction with the former; departing from the juſt view of Chriſtianity as the *doctrine according to godlineſs*; loſing ſight of the great deſign of it, the promoting of the knowledge and love of God, and a conformity to him in univerſal Goodneſs. This ſets men adrift, and leaves them to be *toſſed to and fro*, as in

[a] *John* xii. 42.

a wide Ocean, *by every wind of doctrine*, having loſt the proper mark by which to ſteer their courſe. Loſing the juſt view of Divine Truth, as *the truth which is after godlineſs* [a], this hath made way for the grand error of laying the ſtreſs of Religion upon a *dead unactive faith* [b]; placing the main of the Chriſtian character in *ſoundneſs of belief*, without a *ſound heart*, recovered from the death of ſin to the life of holineſs and righteouſneſs. By this means have been introduced, in place of the plain practical truths of Chriſtianity, intricate and uſeleſs ſpeculations; conceited Notions, which *miniſter queſtions, rather than godly edifying* [c]; and have filled the world with endleſs and perplexed Diſputes. And theſe, by the further influence of mens corrupt hearts, have brought after them pernicious doctrines; ſuch as depretiate moral virtue, and weaken or deſtroy the force of its obligations; which pretend to exalt the Grace of God upon the ruins of holineſs and a good life, and in effect make Chriſt *the Miniſter of ſin*; Doctrines which promiſe men *peace* and ſafety, while they *walk in the imaginations of* their own evil *hearts* [d]. Thus do men wander farther and farther into the ways of error and corruption, when once they have loſt ſight of the great deſign of the Diſcoveries of Divine Truth.

[a] *Tit.* i. 1.
[b] *James* ii. 20. 26.
[c] 1 *Tim.* i. 4.
[d] *Deut.* xxix. 19.

This is the account which the Scripture expreſsly gives us of the riſe and progreſs of corrupt Doctrine. Men not *conſenting* unto *the doctrine which is according to godlineſs*, fall a *doting about queſtions, and ſtrifes of words: ſwerving from the end of the Commandment*, which *is charity*, or love, *out of a pure heart, and of a good conſcience, and of faith unfeigned*; they *turn aſide into vain jangling; underſtanding neither what they ſay, nor whereof they affirm* [a]: not receiving *the love of the Truth*, as recommended to their Conſciences by the illuſtrious Characters of Goodneſs; this makes way for *ſtrong deluſions*, and *all* the *deceivableneſs of unrighteouſneſs* [b].

In like manner, Chriſtians loſing the juſt view of the duties of religious worſhip, as exerciſes of the heart, and means of habitual Goodneſs; this hath made way for turning it into mere ſuperſtition; for introducing a great deal of uſeleſs pomp and ſhow into Religion; a number of fanciful rites and ceremonies, of ſuppoſed myſterious meaning, but ſerving only to amuſe and aſtoniſh people, and of no ſort of uſe to convey to the mind any juſt ſentiments of Piety, and promote that true Devotion of the heart which is accompanied with Underſtanding. The true nature and deſign of religious worſhip not being attended to, men have come to place

[a] 1 *Tim.* i. 5. 6. 7. [b] 2 *Theſſ.* ii. 10. 11.

Religion

Religion in a mere outward attendance on the Ordinances of it; in a veneration for Temples and Veſtments, in formal bows and proſtrations: Or, in place of an uniform Piety and Goodneſs, they have come to lay ſtreſs on tranſitory flights of Devotion; on certain inward emotions, raiſed by the influence of ſounds, and outward appearances of ſolemnity.

All theſe corruptions of Doctrine and Worſhip have led on a further oppoſition to true Religion, under a name of it. Men forgetting the deſign of Religion, and becoming devoted to certain opinions and forms which have no relation to it; their Zeal for theſe, *a Zeal without knowledge*, renouncing the rules of Chriſtianity, hath carried them into rage and fury, into all the cruelties and barbarities of perſecution, in the pretended Cauſe of Religion. Thus hath a pretence of Religion been improved to make people wicked, inſtead of making them good: a ſpirit of *bitter envying and ſtrife*, productive of *confuſion, and every evil work*; to which the Apoſtle *James* gives the characters of *earthly, ſenſual, and deviliſh*; hath prevailed, in oppoſition to that *wiſdom which is from above*, which *is pure, peaceable, gentle, and eaſy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocriſy* [a].

[a] *James* iii. 14. &c.

THE cauſes which promote theſe inſtances of Corruption, both in their riſe and progreſs, may be obvious.

Mens luſts and vitious paſſions creating an enmity in their hearts to the deſign of Religion, and to the doctrines and inſtitutions of it in the genuine appearance of them, they become blind to what they are averſe from ſeeing; they turn away from thoſe views of Religion which give check to their vitious inclinations; they moſt readily embrace ſuch notions of it as are indulgent to their Vices, and give a kind of eaſe and ſecurity to their minds in a ſinful courſe. This was the original Cauſe of the groſs errors and ſuperſtitions of the Heathen world; *they did not like to retain God in their knowledge* [a]. And the ſame thing hath corrupted Religion among Chriſtians: Taking *pleaſure in unrighteouſneſs* [b], and therefore not being able to *endure ſound Doctrine* [c], they have embraced deluſions in the room of truth.

Together with the influence of mens luſts, there conſpires, to lead them aſtray from genuine Chriſtianity, a prevailing humour for being amuſed with intricate ſpeculations in Religion; with notions which carry an appearance of Learning and deep penetration: there is a diſtaſte of plain uſeful inſtruction; this, like the Manna in the wilderneſs, is

[a] *Rom.* i. 28. [b] 2 *Theſſ.* ii. 12. [c] 2 *Tim.* iv. 3. 4.

lothed

lothed as *light food;* what is eaſy to be underſtood, many do not think worth their attending to. They want to be entertained with things ſtrange, and out of the way; with matters of controverſy, and doubtful diſputation: taken up with this vain ſhew of Wiſdom, they undervalue the plain practical Wiſdom of true Religion. There is a fondneſs of ſhew in worſhip; of things which ſtrike the ſenſes and imagination, and raiſe aſtoniſhment: this carries men off from that *ſimplicity which is in Chriſt* [a]. Even thoſe who have been brought up in an averſion at the moſt pompous Rites and Ceremonies, are apt to diſcover the ſame general humour in ſeveral reſpects; to be more taken up with certain outward circumſtances of Solemnity, than with inward Devotion, and the ſimple and natural expreſſions of it; to be much in fancy with uncommon appearances of Religion at particular times, with a great crowd, and an extraordinary number and length of religious ſervices on ſpecial occaſions; inſtead of an uniform Piety running through the whole of life. Theſe weakneſſes of Mankind lay them further open to be led aſide from the plain truths and Inſtitutions of the Goſpel: if at once they can get their fancies in Religion gratified, and their luſts indulged with ſecurity, ſuch a Scheme of Religion finds

[a] 2 *Cor.* xi. 3.

eaſy

eaſy reception, and takes faſt hold of the minds of corrupt Men.

Theſe weakneſſes and paſſions of Mankind have afforded plenty of matter for deſigning Men to work upon, who have had other ends in view than to make people good; who have wanted to make Religion a tool to their Intereſt and Ambition, by ſecuring a leading among Mankind; and therefore, inſtead of laying themſelves out to correct their follies and vices, have taken care to accommodate Religion to their depraved humours. And when by ſuch means as theſe error and ſuperſtition have once gained ground, and prevailed for ſome time in the world; then attachment to Cuſtom, and a veneration for our Anceſtors, eſtabliſh their dominion: as they come to be of long ſtanding, Antiquity renders them ſacred; any attempts to recover Men to truth and reaſon are lookt upon as dangerous innovations, and a preſumptuous pretence to be wiſer than our Forefathers.

THUS we ſee how true Chriſtianity is marked out amidſt all corruptions of it; and whence theſe have their riſe, with the Cauſes which promote them.

I COME now to the improvement we are to make of theſe obſervations.

1. What

1. What hath been ſaid leads us to a juſt view of theſe Corruptions of Chriſtianity which have now for a long time prevailed in a great part of the Chriſtian world; that groſs departure from the true Religion of Jeſus, for which the Church of *Rome* is no leſs remarkable, than for her impudence in pretending to be the only true Church. *There* is the foundation of Corruption moſt ſecurely laid, in the eſtabliſhment of an abſolute Authority in Popes and Councils, ſupported by an arrogant claim to infallibility; a claim, which, as it appears upon a very eaſy examination to have no foundation in the words of Chriſt, is a plain uſurpation upon his Authority: a claim ſo evidently ſubverſive of his Authority as the only Lord and Maſter of Chriſtians, that people are even excluded from *examining* the grounds of it, and how far it is derived from him as they pretend. To their deciſions muſt Chriſtians ſubmit their Faith and Conſciences without reſerve; from them muſt they take their Religion implicitly, and not from their Saviour's own Words. Theſe they are not ſo much as allowed to conſult, without a ſpecial licence; which is granted only to thoſe who, they are well aſſured, will not make what they call a wrong uſe of it. At the ſame time, pretended *Traditions* are impoſed upon them, as of equal authority

thority with the *ſtanding records* of the inſtructions of Chriſt and his Apoſtles, and the other written Oracles of God.

Agreeable to this foundation is the ſuperſtructure which hath been built upon it: inſtead of the ſpiritual Religion of Chriſt, a Syſtem of worldly Policy: inſtead of *the wholſome Words of our Lord Jeſus*, which at once enlighten the Underſtanding, and purify the heart; Chriſtians have impoſed upon their belief abſurd and unintelligible Doctrines; fitted indeed to promote a blind Veneration for the Teachers of them, but incapable of having any rational good influence on the heart and life. Such is that ſtrange doctrine, which aſcribes to a puny Mortal the power of turning a Wafer into a God; and, inſtead of that ſpiritual improvement of the Death of Chriſt, by which the Soul is nouriſhed up for eternal life, amuſes people with the aſtoniſhing fancy of *bodily* feeding on the fleſh and blood of Chriſt for the *Salvation of their Souls! There*, in oppoſition to the uſeful tendency of true Chriſtianity, men are taught a Religion which tends in many reſpects to ſooth their vitious paſſions, and make them ſecure in Sin: ſuch are their pernicious doctrines concerning Penance, and Indulgences; and the Charm of *extreme Unction*, for ſaving a dying Sinner: a Religion which, with a ſhew of giving the ſtrongeſt

ſtrongeſt recommendation of good works, nouriſhes the Pride of Man, by placing a merit with God in our good performances; and, at the ſame time, deſtroys the neceſſity of good Works, where Men are able to purchaſe a ſhare in the exhauſtible fund of Merits lodged with the Church.

There, in place of that ſpiritual Worſhip which moſt directly tends to raiſe the Soul to God, and carries both the underſtanding and heart along with it, is ſet up an Ignorant Devotion, the unintelligible worſhip of an unknown tongue; a Superſtitious Worſhip, conſiſting of a number of pompous rites and ceremonies, with a mixture of ridiculous fopperies, and ſenſeleſs charms; an Idolatrous Service; worſhipping God by images; and paying thoſe divine honours to Angels and Saints as ſuppoſed Mediators, which are due only to the *one God*, *and* the *one Mediator between God and Man* [a].

And, to crown all; in oppoſition to that Religion which is *love* [b], in that corrupt Church is authoriſed, under a name of religious zeal, hatred and cruelty, bloodſhed and maſſacre. To murder men by thouſands in the pretended cauſe of Religion, to commit ſuch barbarities as pure Humanity is ſhocked at, paſſes for *doing God ſervice*, for

[a] 1 *Tim.* ii. 5. [b] 1 *John* iv. 16.

ſerving the intereſts of the great Lover of Mankind, who came *not to deſtroy Mens lives, but to ſave them.* Theſe are among the Actions which are extolled by them as highly meritorious; the Merit of which will cover a Multitude of Sins! Strange perverſion of the Religion of Jeſus!

Such monſtrous abſurdities of Error, Superſtition and Barbarity, are Men capable of being led into, when once they loſe ſight of the great deſign of Religion, and are carried off from a cloſe attention to Jeſus Chriſt, who is *the Way, the Truth, and the Life;* when, having left this only ſure Guide, they are given up to the dictates of their own corrupt hearts, working along with the Art of deceitful Men. This leads us,

2. To acknowledge our own happineſs, in the recovery of true Religion from theſe groſs Corruptions. We enjoy that profeſſion of Chriſtianity, which acknowledges Jeſus Chriſt as our only Lord and Maſter, the alone King and Head of his Church. All Chriſtians among us are admitted to the liberty of his Servants, and delivered from a ſlaviſh ſubjection to human Authority. They have acceſs to the words of Chriſt himſelf, to the words of the Holy Spirit ſpeaking in the Scriptures, and from them to take their Religion: they have them tranſla-

ted

ted into a Language which they underſtand; and have the higheſt moral Evidence of their being juſtly tranſlated. To them are they directed by our Church [a] as the only Rule of Faith and Manners, *by which all decrees of Councils and doctrines of Men are to be examined:* they are taught to attend to *the Spirit of God* himſelf *ſpeaking in the Scripture, and in his Sentence alone to reſt;* in what they themſelves underſtand to be his Sentence, and not what others affirm it to be: that they are *not to give implicit faith and a blind obedience to Doctrines and Commandments of Men;* that *all Synods or Councils ſince the Apoſtles times being liable to err, they are not to be made the Rule of faith or practice, but to be uſed as an Help in both.* Chriſtians being thus led by the hand to the words of Chriſt and his Apoſtles, in *them* they have his Religion ſet before them in its native Beauty and Glory: From them do we learn that genuine purity of Doctrine which tends to purify our hearts and lives; to ſubdue our ſenſual, worldly, and malicious paſſions; and, together with ſincere Devotion, to promote Love and Peace among Mankind: From them do we receive the Inſtitutions of Chriſt in their original purity and ſimplicity; and theſe we enjoy, free from that

[a] Vid. *Confeſſion of Faith*, chap. 1. § 10. chap. 20. § 2. & chap. 31. § 4.

groſs Idolatry and Superſtition with which the Popiſh Religion hath blended them.

This bleſſing of pure Religion, and the noble freedom of Chriſtianity, did our Forefathers, by the good hand of God, happily recover from Popiſh Corruption and Slavery at our Reformation: An Event the more remarkable, conſidering the oppoſition it could not fail to meet with, from the luſts and prejudices of Men, ſtrongly engaged in behalf of that corrupt Religion; and from the Art and Violence of thoſe Lords over God's Heritage, whoſe power and wealth were at ſtake. As that Church hath ever ſince been reſtleſs in her endeavours to recover the ground ſhe then loſt; ſo how nearly had ſhe accompliſhed this, by means of a Prince devoted to her intereſts! How ſeverely were the beginnings of Popiſh Tyranny actually felt in theſe lands! when God was pleaſed, of his great mercy, to raiſe up for our Deliverance the glorious King *William*; and by his hand to avert the impending ruin; to reſtore the Nation to the quiet enjoyment of true Religion and Liberty, and to provide for the future ſecurity of theſe great Bleſſings, under a Proteſtant Government! Since that happy period, how conſpicuouſly hath the hand of God been ſeen, in repeated inſtances, preſerving and ſtrengthening what he had thus wrought for us!

How

How juſtly ſhould the late remarkable inſtance we have had of this, cure that inſenſibility and forgetfulneſs of the Divine Goodneſs, which we are apt to contract in the continued enjoyment of our Mercies, and revive our ſenſe of all our paſt deliverances! When, after repeated unſucceſsful Attempts, a wicked Combination was again formed in favour of a Popiſh Pretender to the Crown, threatening us with all the dreadful miſchiefs of Popery and Slavery; our moſt gracious God was pleaſed again to appear for our deliverance, and to reſcue us from the Jaws of deſtruction, by the Hand of an illuſtrious Prince of that Royal Family, in which the Nation is in all reſpects ſo happy.

By ſuch a remarkable train of Providences, do we continue to enjoy, among other ſignal advantages, the ineſtimable bleſſing of pure Chriſtianity, and the freedom of our Chriſtian profeſſion, ſecured to us by the protection of eſtabliſhed Laws, and the Government of a Proteſtant King: a King who, in the whole of his Conduct, ſhews himſelf the faithful Guardian, both of the Religious and Civil Liberties of his people. And how much is the preſent comfort of our ſituation increaſed, by the hopeful proſpect we have of the continuance of our bleſſings to Poſterity, under a Royal Family brought up in a ſacred regard to our Laws and Liberties; and

and who, as they come to appear in life, ſhow themſelves adorned with all thoſe amiable and princely Virtues which promiſe the Nation a ſucceſſion of happineſs.

Theſe things, which we ought often to reflect upon with the higheſt gratitude and thankfulneſs to God, our thoughts are particularly led to upon this occaſion; when we have the ſatisfaction of meeting together in a General Aſſembly of this Church, under the Countenance and Protection of Royal Authority, repreſented by a Noble Perſon, who hath diſtinguiſhed himſelf, on all occaſions, as a firm and zealous Friend to the connected Intereſts of the Reformation and the Revolution, and to our preſent happy Eſtabliſhment.

With a due ſenſe of our Happineſs, let us aſcribe to God the glory of his great Goodneſs, and ſhew forth *his marvellous Works which he hath done* for us. And let us all, in our ſeveral ſtations, ſet ourſelves to maintain and preſerve the Bleſſings we enjoy, with becoming vigour and watchfulneſs, againſt all poſſible attempts to deprive us of them. As this is eſpecially incumbent upon us who have the honour to be the Miniſters of this Religion, Let us, My Reverend Fathers and Brethren, act our parts for ſupporting its Intereſts with all diligence and faithfulneſs; Let us be at pains to promote among

among our people a due knowledge and ſenſe of the Bleſſings of the Reformation; and of our preſent happy Conſtitution, on which the ſecurity of the Proteſtant Religion among us does, under God, depend. Let us be careful to inſpire people with a juſt zeal in defence of our Religion and Liberties, againſt all who eſpouſe Intereſts inconſiſtent with them. We may be ſenſible, that the obſtinacy and reſtleſſneſs of our Enemies, and their *cunning Craftineſs whereby they lie in wait to deceive*, call upon us to exert ourſelves in a very ſpecial manner. If ever we may expect that our Enemies will give over all thoughts of diſturbing our peace; it muſt be when they find, that we ſhow as unwearied and determined a zeal to maintain our moſt valuable intereſts, as they have, or can have, to deſtroy them; that we are as watchful as they are artful, and reſolve ever to be ſo.

BUT it deſerves our particular attention, that, beſides the groſs Corruptions of Popery, there may be other ſhapes of Error and Superſtition which in the main agree with them, as they carry men off from being ſtedfaſt followers of Chriſt, and are deſtructive of the life and *power of Godlineſs*: that the ſpirit and principles of Popery may ſecretly lurk under a profeſſed abhorrence of them.

them. Reſting our Faith and Practice in Religious matters upon Cuſtom, Education, and Human Authority; an inclination to pervert Chriſtianity, by finding out Salvos for a bad life; a proneneſs to turn Religion into mere Superſtition, by laying the ſtreſs of it upon external performances, and a great deal of noiſe and ſhow; a Spirit of bitterneſs and ſeverity, clothed with a pretence of Religious Zeal: theſe evils may, and I am afraid do, too much prevail among profeſſed Proteſtants. It greatly challenges our attention, that Corruptions in Religion are introduced gradually; and that the Cauſes which promote them, the bad paſſions and weakneſſes of men, are too common, and operate very often inſenſibly. And therefore,

3. It concerns us to uſe our moſt careful endeavours, to preſerve the Purity of Chriſtianity againſt all kinds and degrees of Corruption, and to guard againſt the Cauſes from which theſe ſpring.

May I preſume again to addreſs you, My Reverend Fathers and Brethren in the Miniſtry; not as if by any thing I can ſay I would pretend to give Inſtruction to you, from whom I ought rather to receive it; but that I may on this occaſion join my thoughts with what will readily be yours, in bringing

bringing home to ourſelves what is incumbent upon us, as we would anſwer the important ends of our Miniſtry, and bear our ſacred Character worthily. The maintaining of the profeſſion of Chriſtianity in its primitive glory, free from all impure mixtures, depends greatly on the part we act. Let us, as faithful Servants of Chriſt, make it our buſineſs to lead people to a ſincere acknowledgment of him as their only Lord and Saviour. Let us direct their attention to *his words*, and give them the beſt aſſiſtance we can in taking their Religion from the Scriptures themſelves. Let us endeavour to promote among Chriſtians that *noble* freedom which becomes them, of *ſearching the Scriptures daily, whether things are ſo* [a] as we ſay to them. Let us reject the compliments of implicit faith and a blind obedience, and honeſtly endeavour to correct any weakneſs of this ſort where-ever it appears. In all our endeavours to gain and keep up an influence among our people; let this be minded by us in a due ſubſerviency to the honour of Jeſus Chriſt, and the intereſts of his Kingdom, that we may be the more ſucceſsful in promoting theſe. And great need have we to take care, that the deſign of ſecuring to ourſelves an intereſt in mens eſteem and af-

[a] *Acts* xvii. 11.

 feſtions,

fections, which we firſt take up as neceſſary to our ſucceſs, do not inſenſibly come to be our principal aim, and take place of that to which it ought to be *ſubordinate*. Let us guard againſt theſe ſecret workings of Pride and Selfiſhneſs in our breaſts, which would diſpoſe us to ſet up our own honour and authority in competition with that of our great Maſter, and carry us off from the diſintereſted Service we owe to him.

Let *the Spirit of Chriſt, dwelling in our hearts*, and inſpiring us with a love of Goodneſs, fix our attention on the valuable deſign of Chriſtianity, the reforming of Mankind, and *making* them *partakers of a divine nature* [a]. To this let us direct all our religious inſtructions. Let us recommend Jeſus Chriſt to the hearts of Men as a Saviour from ſin; and ſet before them that *Grace of God which bringeth Salvation*, as *teaching us, that, denying ungodlineſs and worldly luſts, we ſhould live ſoberly, righteouſly, and godly, in this preſent world* [b]. Let us particularly inculcate upon them that great principle of religion, that *God is Love* [c]; and, conſequently, that the true temper of Religion is *Love*; and rejects, as abſurd and monſtrous, every pretence of regard to God and Chriſt which carries with it any thing of hatred, wrath,

[a] 2 *Pet.* i. 4. [b] *Tit.* ii. 11. 12. [c] 1 *John* iv. 8. 16.

and

and ſeverity. Let us lead people to the practical Improvement of the Ordinances of Chriſt; repreſenting them in their proper light, as means of devout Correſpondence with God, and of promoting a Conformity to him: By this juſt view of Chriſtian Worſhip, and by the original Appointments of Chriſt himſelf, which we are to keep cloſe in our eye, let us guard people againſt every ſuperſtitious notion and practice.

Let us never be ſo unfaithful to God, or unjuſt to Men, as to accommodate Religion to their corrupt or fooliſh humours; which is to pleaſe them, by putting a fatal cheat upon them. While we *pleaſe* them *for* their *good, and to* their *edification*, let us ſet ourſelves, with an honeſt ſteadineſs, to correct their bad paſſions and unreaſonable humours, and to make them truly wiſer and better: Let us have the reſolution to tell them neceſſary and wholſome truths, which may do them good upon reflexion, though we ſhould in the mean time diſoblige them.

In fine, as Preachers of *the Doctrine according to Godlineſs*, let us be exemplary to others in the Practice of it. Let us never be found contradicting in our *own* lives what we recommend to others. A vitious Miniſter is, of all Characters in the World, the moſt worthleſs and contemptible; a Character deſpiſed even by thoſe who are themſelves

ſelves profane and vitious. There are hardly any ſo far hardened in vice, as not to ſee and be ſhocked at the groſs inconſiſtency; *A Preacher of Righteouſneſs, and a Bad Man!* Let us ſhow the Beauty of Holineſs, and the excellent influence of Chriſtianity, exemplified in our own Character and Behaviour; and be ambitious of being able to ſay to our people, *Thoſe things which ye have heard and ſeen in me, do* [a]. As we are particularly expoſed to the view of the World, *let* our *Light ſo ſhine before Men, that they may ſee* our *good works, and glorify* our *Father who is in heaven* [b].

As to the reſt of you, my Hearers: Conſider your profeſſed Character as the Diſciples of Jeſus. Submit to *him* as your only Lord; attend to *his* inſtructions, obey *his* precepts, make *his* Example your great Pattern, and *be followers of* us *as* we *are of Chriſt* [c]. *Be not the Servants of Men* in religious matters: Act ſteadily in theſe according to your beſt views, as you ſhall be anſwerable to your great Lord and Judge; and account it but *a ſmall thing* to *be judged of Man's day* [d]. Never loſe ſight of the practical deſign of Chriſtianity, the purifying of

[a] *Phil.* iv. 9.
[b] *Matth.* v. 16.
[c] 1 *Cor.* xi. 1.
[d] 1 *Cor.* iv. 3.

your

your hearts and lives, and your improvement in all Goodneſs. Conſider all the Doctrines and Inſtitutions of Religion as having relation to this deſign, and from it deriving their value and importance: And let this lead you to reject, as no part of Chriſtianity, what hath no connexion with the valuable purpoſe of it; eſpecially what is oppoſite to that purpoſe; every thing contrary to that Divine temper of Love and Goodneſs, in which conſiſts our Conformity to God and Jeſus Chriſt.

In forming your Notions, and regulating your practice in matters of Religion, as you are to ſcorn a ſlaviſh blind Subjection to Men; ſo guard with the utmoſt care againſt an inward Slavery, the influence of corrupt Paſſions, no leſs deſtructive of the true freedom of the Servants of Chriſt. Let the love of Truth and Goodneſs be the prevailing Principle in your Souls; to this let all your paſſions and intereſts be ſubjected: then *knowing* and following *the Truth, the Truth ſhall make you free* [a].

To conclude all: As you profeſs the pure Religion of Chriſt, free from thoſe corrupt Mixtures with which it has been blended; be concerned to do honour to your profeſſion, by the purity and goodneſs of your

[a] *John* viii. 32.

lives.

lives. In this let it appear that you *have learned Chriſt, and been taught by Him the truth as it is in Jeſus*; that Divine Truth, which, received with *faith and love*, at once enlightens and reforms the ſoul, and leads men, by a gradual courſe of Improvement, to the higheſt perfection and happineſs of their nature in the Heavenly State. To which may God, of his infinite Mercy, bring us all, through Jeſus Chriſt our Lord! *Amen.*

F I N I S.

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